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ABSTRACT

The teaching of writing in the American Indian-English bilingual classroom is hampered in that most Amerindian languages have only recently been alphabetized. There are two problems: (1) What standard or orthography will be adopted? (2) What standards of style will be developed? Usually, there are several different writing systems for any one Amerindian language, and it will be up to the schools to develop standards of spelling and punctuation. The second problem is more closely related to the bilingual education issue. Given the lack of literature in Amerindian languages, a model for developing writing style in a native language is needed. In an ideal bilingual education system, the child learns all cognitive skills, including writing, in the native language while studying English as a second language. Eventually, the skills developed in the native language can be transferred to English. The positive reinforcement of the native language can also promote the child's self-image as a speaker of it. The lack of materials in American Indian languages makes this difficult, but it is felt that the children themselves will eventually determine, through their output, acceptable writing style in their native tongues. English writing style would then be taught separately. (PJM)

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Writing in Recently Alphabetized Languages

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In many parts of the world languages which have not traditionally been used in formal schooling are now making their way into the classroom. In the United States "bilingual education" has introduced many minority languages into elementary curriculums. The Soviet Union has been developing a number of minority languages for school and other uses. Some developing nations are building at least their primary schooling on the basic of vernacular education. In some cases the forms and needs of schooling are not easily compatible with the characteristics of the languages to be used. Some languages are not developed for use in certain school subject areas such as particular technological matters. The principle of education for universal literacy inherent in some school systems could conflict with the conditions for literacy in some languages which have traditionally been the preserve of an elite. Some literate and oral functions of the languages, functions which the modern schools require of a language, are non-existent or just beginning to develop.

This paper describes a few of the phenomena encountered in the introduction of some minority languages, Amerindian languages, into North American school systems which are dominated by the majority language, English. Examples here are drawn from schools with some form of Amerindian language programs in Ontario. The school systems in Ontario and the use of English in them are typical of most North American school systems and probably

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share relevant characteristics with other school systems which are dominated by international, standardized, majority languages throughout the world. All the Amerindian languages used in Ontario are considered here because they have all been observed to exhibit at least some of the characteristics described here. There is no evidence to indicate that all Amerindian languages or all minority languages with a century or less of alphabetization would show the same tendencies, but the possibility invites further study. While observations in this general vein could be made about the process of learning to read in Amerindian languages in English dominated school systems as well, this paper will focus on writing in Amerindian languages.

In most Amerindian communities in Ontario, English has roles which are largely complementary to those of the local Amerindian language. The status of English as a national official language, language of commerce and industry, and language of education gives it certain roles. The fact that it is developed for many functions gives it other roles such as the language for business, technical and government functions. Most written communication is in English. In oral English the standard and non-standard dialects and forms have their appropriate use, and standards for the written language are suitably applied to different kinds of written materials.

The roles that may be filled by the Amerindian languages are largely oral. They include medium of social interaction and family life, community politics and administration, cultural and Christian and non-Christian religious expression, retail commerce, local services and industry, aspects of schooling, newspapers and radio stations. The degree to which English fills these roles or has taken them over varies greatly across the province, examples of both extremes being extant. In all areas the use of Amerindian

languages is declining or just being maintained as English threatens to take over greater quantities and functions of communications in Amerindian communities. Dialect differences reveal geographical and family lines of demarcation but in most Amerindian language groups a set standard of language usage or dialect recognized as the standard by most speakers does not exist.

There is variety in the patterns of the development of writing systems for Amerindian languages. There were few, if any, written symbolic systems used for any Amerindian language in Canada and the United States before 1500. Writing systems based on the roman alphabet were developed by Europeans and Amerindians and have been used for a range of purposes from jotting down names and words to writing political or religious texts. In the past two centuries a number of unusual writing systems have developed such as the syllabic systems for writing Algonquian languages in Canada and Cherokee in the United States. These, too, were used for a variety of purposes. The two syllabic systems became widely used by Amerindians and their European contacts. In this century alphabet based systems have been developed for virtually all Amerindian languages in Canada and the United States.

For the purposes of the following discussion, some broad generalizations about writing in Amerindian languages must be made here. Most Amerindian languages have only had writing systems devised for them in this century. There are usually several different writing systems for any one language being used by Amerindians and others at present. Few writing systems are used consistently with regards to spelling, punctuation, and

styles or forms such as correspondence forms or literary conventions, and the standards that are described for any system do not have the authority to produce consistency of use. There is relatively little literature available in Amerindian languages. The bulk of the published material is Bible translations and other Christian religious material, public documents, school books of stories and legends, and newspapers. Some people use an Amerindian language for written personal communication. There seems to be an increase in Amerindian literacy and the publication of materials in Amerindian languages. This trend seems to be related to recent rallying of interest in Amerindian ethnic identity. Most literate Amerindians are monoliterate in English or at least learned to write English first. Actual conditions differ greatly from community to community but these statements can provide a generalized picture for the purposes of this discussion.

Local conditions, legislation and public opinion produce variations in the form in which minority languages are used in schools. For this discussion let us adopt the term bilingual education and let us consider a bilingual education program to be a program in elementary school for ethnically marked - in this case Amerindian - children in which the children's mother or ancestral tongue is used in some way as medium or subject of instruction along with English. Let us assume that the purpose of the bilingual program is to ease the transition from home to school environment and thus help the children adjust better to school. A second purpose may be to reinforce the children's ancestral culture, to maintain the Amerindian language or to teach it as a second language to those who speak only English.[1] The expected result is that the children will learn English better, will achieve better in school and will relate better to their ancestral language and culture than if only English were used in the school.

How is the Amerindian languages in school programs used to accomplish these difficult feats? Amerindian children generally are among the lowest ethnic groups with regards to school achievement, use of (standard) English and in positive self-concept in relation to their ethnic background. Many methods have been tried to improve this situation. The children's mother or ancestral tongue is expected to operate in several ways in a bilingual program depending on the language background of the children and the purposes of the program. One way is that the Amerindian language is expected to make the school environment more like the home environment so that the children find the school less strange and threatening. Obviously, this technique is appropriate for children from homes in which an Amerindian language is predominant and particularly, for children who speak little or no English when they enter school. However, it is reasonable to assume that it could also fulfill this function in schools for children who speak little of the local Amerindian language but who hear it frequently in their homes and community.

A second way in which an Amerindian language is expected to help in a school program is in permitting the children to develop skills in their mother tongue which they can later transfer to English. Again, this is most applicable to children who are monolingual in an Amerindian language. Oral language skills development, the introduction of reading and writing, and the development of cognitive skills are carried out in the Amerindian language while basic skill is being developed in English as a second language. English is only gradually introduced as the medium of instruction as the children become able to handle it. If their mother tongue was not used in school in this way then the children would be expected to concentrate

on English language learning from the beginning. The development of their native language is considered irrelevant in the latter point of view and conceptual development can proceed only slowly through the medium of the new language as it is learned. But the use of the mother tongue can permit further language and conceptual development from the first while English is being learned.

The skills and concepts learned in the mother tongue can be expected to be reasonably transferable to English language and English medium learning. The third use for an Amerindian language in the school is to formally recognize its value and thus to encourage the children to take pride in it. This can be done for Amerindian speaking and English speaking Amerindian children through first or second language programs. The program aims to show that the Amerindian language has a status that is equal to, although not the same as English. The program can aim to reinforce the children's sense of their identity as Amerindians through the use of the language in the school. It may further aim to revive or maintain the use of the language as a separate end.

Against this sketchy background, let us now look at writing instruction. English medium schools for English speaking children aim to teach children to communicate competently in writing according to the norms used in society around them and to encourage children to express themselves freely through the written medium for their own pleasure and needs, for communication with others, and as an occupational skill. These two aspects are not completely separable. The school is expected to have a high degree of success in the first aim but expects a lower rate of excellence in the second because of differences among children in their talent for and interest in writing.

The school also has a mandate to attempt to produce the same results in English literacy among Amerindian children regardless of their mother tongue. Amerindian parents almost universally approve of these goals for their children's schooling.

In bilingual education programs writing in an Amerindian language may be taught. The Amerindian language writing teacher faces many challenges. Some are related to the type and quantity of writing in Amerindian languages that now exist. Taking the problems of quantity first, one can readily see that there is little literature now available to serve as examples for the learners. It was mentioned elsewhere by this writer and Robert Anthony[2] that there is some question whether enough literature exists for Amerindian children to read in order to become truly mature readers. It could be extrapolated from that point that it may be necessary for would-be writers to be exposed to a critical quantity of writing in order to become mature writers. Further study may shed light on these questions. But whatever advantage a large quantity of literature would have, there are so few speakers of almost all the Amerindian languages that it seems unlikely that there will ever be much material produced for such a small readership. A great deal of work has been done recently on designing orthographies for Amerindian languages which will permit texts to be comprehensible across dialect boundaries. This increases the amount of literature available to many Amerindian readers. If a standard dialect were recognized for many Amerindian languages the problem would be reduced even further.

As far as the type of writing that now exists in Amerindian languages, the problems for the school lie in the fact that there is inconsistency in the ways in which the writing is spelled, punctuated and organized into

forms such as letters, newspaper articles, etc., and in the fact that there may be disagreement in the community about which of several different orthographies should be used. In the English speaking majority society standards for the use of English are set outside the elementary school and the elementary school uses these standards in teaching writing to the children. But in most Amerindian communities the school's use of the language is likely to set many of the future standards for the written language because it is the focus of the largest amount of writing and reading in the community and may also have the social authority and the facilities to make these standards known and used.

Teaching Amerindian language writing for competent communication is not the problem it is for English. Most Amerindian language orthographies are more closely related to the phonology than English writing is. There are few rules of usage for writing such as letter formats. The school may either arbitrarily create such rules, look to the community for standards, or just ignore the problem as non-existent and, therefore, irrelevant. An easy way to get style and format standards is to borrow them from English. This would aid in later transfer of skills to English if writing is first taught in the mother tongue. But this might not be advantageous for the cultural goals of the program. This point will be returned to later.

Teaching writing for personal expression is also coloured by this same condition. There are few expressive styles and forms which have been used in most Amerindian language writing. As mentioned above, the learners may need a variety of writing in their reading experience to encourage their creativity. If they begin reading and writing in their Amerindian language, then they will not get that variety of experience from the material available. But if

they become literate in English first they will be influenced by the English models. John Nicols, who is involved in literacy instruction in Cree and Ojibwe for Amerindian teachers, reports that in northwestern Ontario bilingual Cree-English and Ojibwe-English writers usually write their materials - essays, newspaper reports and so on - in English and then translate them into Cree or Ojibwe. This means that they are taking both their knowledge of writing forms and their skills in creative expression from what they know of English rather than finding a uniquely Cree or Ojibwe way of writing. Neither the language itself nor the task seems to override the effects of their English learning. These writers were literate in English from regular schooling and had learned to write Cree or Ojibwe as adults. If children become literate in their Amerindian language first they might avoid the influence of English and produce some unique forms. The school must carefully set its policy in the teaching of Amerindian writing in order to produce the results it wants. As with the teaching of writing for communicative purposes, the school can direct the children toward English-like forms in hopes that this training will transfer to their English learning, or it can encourage the children to produce material that will be peculiar to the language.

When the schools are in the unusual position of creating forms and styles which are expected to eventually extend out into the community, an unusual problem arises. Although a good deal of the innovation can be dictated or at least guided by the teacher and other staff members, the children themselves are likely to have the greatest effect on the results produced. The teacher of such a program must rely heavily on the experience approach to reading and writing skills development in order to make

up for the lack of texts and literature in the language. The materials produced through the experience approach are likely to become part of the literature for concurrent and subsequent classes. The material written in the school is more likely to be read outside the school than literature written by children usually is because there is relatively little literature in the language as a whole. The effects of this material from writers who are immature socially and in their language development is a point for interesting speculation.

In conclusion, let us return to the suggested aims of the bilingual program with respect to instruction in an Amerindian language. Writing in an Amerindian language is not going to provide greater continuity with the experiences of home and community since little Amerindian language writing goes on in the child's world outside the school. However, this does not necessarily imply that Amerindian language writing will be seen by the child as contradictory to what he knows. It is important that the school be constantly alert to the possibility that the children or community members may find Amerindian language writing to be inappropriate in the school or in some way a bad reflection on the community's culture.

The school also could introduce Amerindian language writing at least partially to reinforce the children's sense of their ethnic identity. If the children do not find Amerindian language writing inappropriate then they are likely to take pride in the fact that their language has the functions that other languages have and can be used to produce culturally valuable expression. A leap of imagination is required to understand the reason for introducing an aspect to a language and culture which they did not possess before in order to reinforce the uniqueness of that culture,

but it often happens that such an undertaking is effective in Amerindian programs.

Following from this dilemma is the matter of the transfer of skills in writing from the Amerindian language to English if literacy is introduced in the Amerindian language first. There should be useful transfer of skills on the basic level of literacy concerning those aspects which are common to all writing in general and to the two languages in particular[3]. The school is in a position to influence the amount of transfer of skills to English in the area of styles and forms of writing. If there is no existing style or form in the Amerindian language writing for a particular purpose, the school may create one. If English is used as a model, then the children can become familiarized with English styles and forms even before they get to that stage in English language learning. But if the school encourages the children or others to produce styles and forms which are unique to the language, then the advantage to English language learning would not accrue directly. The development of creative writing skills, whatever the immediate product, is a valuable result. The school must always be concerned with the outcomes of its policies and weigh its decisions in relation to the aims of the program. The fact that the aims involve interdependent but apparently conflicting factors serves to make this task a great challenge.

Footnotes

1. It is not the writer's intention in this paper to advocate any particular form of bilingual education programs. These purposes are described here because they are common to many bilingual education programs and have interesting implications.

2. Barbara J. Burnaby and Robert J. Anthony, "Orthography choice for Cree language in education". Working Papers on Bilingualism, 17 (April 1979), pp. 107-34.

3. An example which documents what is probably a good case of language learning transfer from the reading of an Amerindian language to the reading of Spanish can be found in Nancy Modiano, Indian Education in the Chiapas Highlands. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973). To this writer's knowledge, there have been no comparable studies published which document the transfer or lack of it from one language to another in writing skills. Further studies in reading, some which confirm and some which contradict Modiano's findings, can be found in Patricia Lee Engle, "The use of vernacular language in education". Review of Educational Research, 45:2 (1975), pp. 283-325.